

D&D Fiction

Shadows of Stormreach: Chapter 4

Eberron Fiction
by Keith Baker



The bustling frontier city of Stormreach, a cauldron on ambition and secret plots, has grown safe and secure as the only gateway to the riches of Xen'drik. But now danger threatens!

So begins the introduction to [Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach](#). Can you discover the secret mysteries that threaten Stormreach's very existence? For that, you'll need to learn more about this city of Eberron -- continuing with this latest chapter in Keith Baker's latest tale: *Shadows of Stormreach*.

Shadow had learned her trade on the streets of Sharn. If she'd let her parents decide her fate, she probably *would* have ended up studying history. Her father would have preferred for Shadow to stay securely on the administrative side of the family business, or possibly even enter Sharn politics, like her older sister. But Shadow had never taken an interest in books or numbers. She preferred to learn more practical skills. How to locate a hidden door. How to unlock an arcane seal.

How to spot a trap.



She should have kept Spike away from the door. Of course there'd be some sort of security inside. That was common sense. But common sense and Spike had little to do with each other. It was hardly surprising. Spike was an enforcer, not a thief. When Shadow's father had sent her away from Sharn, he'd assigned Spike to protect her. But Saidan Boromar expected his daughter to go into hiding, to find a secure hole and seal herself inside, not to go searching for adventure. Spike was a good soldier, but he was built for battle, not burglary.

Shadow could sense the presence of the trap as the door opened. Magical glyphs gave off a certain resonance—a tingle one felt in the spirit as much as in the nerves. Shadow had worked hard to develop this second sense, and it had saved her life in the past. Given a minute, she could use her tools to deactivate the glyph, allowing her friends to pass unharmed. But Spike had other ideas. As soon as the door opened, he leaped over Shadow and into the small passage. The gems embedded into his armor glowed, a reflection of his fervor. If there was danger, he would meet it head on.

And so he did.

Shadow was already rolling to the side when Spike triggered the glyph. Flame poured out of the passageway. Pressed against the corner of the alley, Shadow escaped the column of fire, but the heat alone was terrible. Through the flames she could faintly see Marcus kneeling behind his broad shield, and she could hear the faintest cry for divine protection over the sound of the explosion.

Within seconds, the fire had faded. Shadow glanced at Marcus. Whether through luck or defensive magic, the priest's shield seemed to have absorbed the brunt of the blast, and he was singed but unharmed. Nocking an arrow to her bow, Shadow spun around the corner, scanning the passage that lay before her.

The walls were largely unharmed by the blast. The glyph had been designed to channel its force at intruders. Spike lay in the center of the narrow stone passage, blown on his back by the explosion, his axe lying next to his outstretched hand. His heartstones were dim.

"Idiot," Shadow murmured, but she did feel a pang of concern for the damaged warforged. Spike might have brought this on himself, but he had been trying to protect her, and she could remember a dozen other times he'd almost been destroyed acting in her defense.

There was no time to get Petra to fix him. The glyph had probably triggered other mystic alarms. Shadow reached into her belt pouch and produced a glass vial filled with glowing green liquid. Pulling the stopper, she flicked her wrist and scattered its contents across Spike's blackened torso. As it struck the warforged, the fluid came to life. It swam across the surface of his body, passing over scorched metal and burned wood, transforming it. Within seconds the damage was fully repaired. Spike's chassis was as polished and perfect as the dress armor of a soldier on parade. As the liquid faded, the light returned to his eyes.

"Princess Sharalin..." he murmured, gazing up at her.

"Shadow," she reminded him, hoping that the damage hadn't affected his memory. "Watch yourself. Those repair oils are costly, and we can't afford to pour our gold away."

"Yes, Shadow," he said, his fluting voice low and subdued.

"Get up. I'm sure the guards will be here any moment. And now that we're committed, don't hold back."

Imminent bloodshed was a sure way to restore Spike's spirits, and the warforged leaped to his feet and reclaimed his axe. The others joined them.

"Let's make our stand here," Shadow said. "If we're going to fight, I want to be sure we can retreat. Petra, can you work with the hallway?"

The elf nodded, calm as ever.

Shadow heard footsteps approaching. "Right. Petra first. Spike and Marcus to close the gap. Everyone ready for this?"

"We serve the Silver Flame this day," Marcus said, striking the amulet on his chest with a mailed fist. "Truly, this is a noble cause."

“If we’re serving the Silver Flame, it would be nice to see a little silver for it,” Shadow muttered.

And then the enemy appeared. There were six of them, dwarves and humans, with little in common except dark clothing and sharp weaponry. Only two had the rat-like features of the creatures they’d fought before.

Earlier that night... *that* battle had been a challenge. At that point Shadow didn’t know what her enemies were capable of. She didn’t have a plan.

This time she was ready.

The hallway was narrow, and the gang members were forced to approach in single file. One of the wererats, a massive creature almost as large as Spike, took the lead. His fur was black, his teeth long, and he held a heavy knife in each hand. Petra stood before him, her only weapon her staff, which seemed to be as delicate and unsuited to battle as Petra herself. If she felt any fear – or indeed, any emotion at all – she kept it hidden. Petra stood her ground, waiting until she could see each tooth and whisker in the beast’s snout. And then she raised her hand.

Petra’s staff was touching the floor, and it drew energy from the stone—a crackling wreath of electricity that rose up the shaft. This force flashed from the staff to her outstretched hand, growing ever brighter. The lightning lashed out, transfixing the huge wererat and arcing on to strike the thieves lined up behind him. The beast howled, twitching in the grip of the magical force. He seemed to double in size as his fur stood on end, and the air filled with the scent of ozone and burning hair. Shadow almost felt pity for their enemies, as she listened to their cries. Almost.

As powerful as Petra’s lightning strike was, the energy only lasted a few moments. But the impact was dramatic. When the lightning faded, five of their foes collapsed to the floor, including the black-furred wererat. His knives clattered against the stone, and wisps of steam drifted from his mouth. The only survivor was the other wererat, who had been standing at the end of the line. This one was female. Her fur was gray and matted, and she wielded a heavy club studded with spikes of dark glass.

This wererat was no fool. She could see that the tide had turned against her, and she turned to flee. But Shadow and her companions had prepared for just such a situation.

“*STOP!*” Marcus cried. His voice was deeper than usual, filled with confidence and authority. Even though the priest wasn’t speaking to her, Shadow felt an instinctive compulsion to obey. The wererat froze in midstride, almost falling to the ground, every muscle rigid.

The paralysis only lasted a moment, but this was all Spike needed. The warforged leaped across the fallen thieves and drove the haft of his axe into her knees. The wererat fell to the ground. The warforged soldier dropped his axe to grapple with her. A moment later, he had her arms pinned and his full weight on her back.

Before the woman could scream, Shadow was upon her, dagger in hand. “Silver, rat,” she whispered. “One sound from you and I cut out your tongue.”

The captive’s eyes widened. As Shadow had seen earlier, these creatures could heal from wounds inflicted by iron or steel, but a silvered blade cut through this magical defense.

“Let me explain a few things. My friend with the commanding voice? He thinks you should die just because you’re, well, a rat. But I want to know who you’re working for. Why you’ve broken your vows to my family.” Shadow traced a line down the prisoner’s snout with the point of her silver blade. “If you give me answers, you might live to see the morning. Do we understand each other?”

The rat-creature nodded.

“Good. How many more of you rats are here tonight?”

“Nine,” the creature said. “Guarding.”

Shadow was an excellent judge of expression and tone. It was considerably harder to read the face of a rat, but she could still smell a lie. No, not a lie ... but something left unsaid. “Guarding, hmm? Guarding what?”

The rat paused. Shadow could smell the lie brewing, so she poked the captive in the forehead. Blood welled around the silver blade.

“Don’t think. Answer. Guarding *what*?”

“Below!” the rat yelped.

Now we’re getting somewhere. Shadow leaned closer. “And *what* is below?”

Shadow could feel the prisoner’s raw emotions, rage mingled with panic. She opened her snout, and for a moment Shadow thought the rat was going to bite her, but Spike had her pinned to the ground, and she couldn’t possibly reach Shadow.

At least, not with her teeth.

There was a blur of motion, a dark shape flashing forward to strike at Shadow. The halfling tumbled backwards, and the strange weapon came up an inch from her neck. Instinct had saved her, and it was instinct that guided her arm. She flung her dagger before she even recognized the nature of the threat, and an instant later her silver blade was protruding from the wererat’s left eye. It was only then that Shadow realized what the creature had attacked her with.

Its tongue.

Shadow’s blade had struck true, and the wererat fell limp against the ground. But the creature’s tongue was stretched out from its mouth... a writhing tendril of muscle almost two feet in length. Its obscene length was tipped by what appeared to be a normal human tongue. Coiled as it was, it reminded Shadow of the hood of a cobra. A sharp barb was tucked beneath this hood, and it was this stinger that had stabbed at Shadow’s throat. As the others watched in amazement, the tongue pulled free of the wererat’s mouth. Shadow reached for her sword, but the tongueworm was already racing towards her, its venomous barb extending for a second blow.

The attack never came. Spike’s axe came down, splitting the creature’s tongue-hood in two. The worm writhed in agony, until a second blow brought an end to its struggles.

Shadow slumped against the ground and let her breath flow out of her. “Marcus, do they all do that?” she said. “Because if they do, I’m starting to get your whole ‘kill them all’ philosophy.”

The cleric shook his head. Beneath his steel helm, his skin glistened with sweat. “I’ve never seen anything like that,” he said. “Though in truth, I’ve never seen one of these creatures in the flesh until this night. All that I know, I know from the doctrine of the faith.”

“Which is surely why you know so little,” Petra said. The sorceress was examining the body of the male wererat. Marcus stared at her, but Petra was armored in indifference, and even Shadow couldn’t decide if the elf had meant the comment as an insult.

“So... does that one have a tongue?” Shadow said. She sheathed her dagger and nocked an arrow. If there were more brigands about, they needed to remain on guard.

“Oh, yes,” said Petra. “He seems to have all the usual parts—and then some.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Petra held out her hand, revealing a small piece of raw muscle that twitched and shuddered. As Shadow looked closer, she could see that it was some sort of small creature. It had no eyes, but a tiny, lamprey-like mouth flexed in the center of its mass.

“It was attached to the palm of our enemy’s hand,” Petra said. “It wants to bond with me. I can feel it. Its thoughts radiate out through the skin.”

“Dorn’s Teeth!” Marcus swore, raising his morningstar for a blow. “Is there no end to the foulness? Drop it. I’d hate to crush your hand when I smash it.” He considered. “Well, perhaps *hate* is a strong word.”

Shadow couldn’t reach Marcus’s raised arm, but she pulled back on his belt. “Hold. Petra, what is it? Some sort of parasite?”

“Not at all,” Petra said. She held the creature up before her face, ignoring Marcus’s scowl. “It’s a symbiant, a lifeform designed to bond with other creatures. And unless I miss my guess, it’s a key.”

“Key?”

“I told you I can feel its thoughts. I think it’s a key for a very unusual lock—a gate that can only be opened through the projection of a specific thought-image.”

Shadow considered this. “So if this thief had it on his hand...”

Petra nodded, and the tiny creature undulated on her palm. “I suspect it’s a key to something in this warehouse.”

Marcus still had his morningstar ready to strike, and Shadow could feel his tension. “We should not suffer the existence of such abominations.”

“Don’t worry,” Shadow said. “You’ll get to destroy it before the night is done. But if Petra is right I want to keep it intact for now. Petra, are you sure it can’t... do anything to you?”

“My will is far too strong for it to force a bonding,” Petra said dismissively. “Let’s just keep it away from Spike.”

As if on cue, the warforged soldier sprinted down the passage. “More coming,” he said. “I was going to take them on myself, but I know you told me to share.”

“Good boy,” Shadow said. “Battle lines!”

And the enemy was upon them.

About the Author

Keith Baker has been an avid fan of **Dungeons & Dragons** since grade school. His life took a dramatic turn in 2002 when he submitted the world of Eberron to the Wizards of the Coast Fantasy Setting Search. In addition to developing the ***Eberron** Campaign Setting* and *Shadows of the Last War*, he has worked for Atlas Games, Goodman Games, and Green Ronin.

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